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LEGACIES, ASSUMPTIONS, AND DECISIONS  
THE PATH TO HIROSHIMA

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## Introduction:

In 1995, the Smithsonian Institute's proposed exhibit of the *Enola Gay* on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the use of the atom bomb on Hiroshima created a furor. Veterans' groups and members of Congress decried the anti-American tone of the exhibit's accompanying commentary and its suggestions that the bomb was not needed to avoid a costly invasion of Japan.<sup>1</sup> Revisionist historians opposed the "cleansing" of history, called for a separation from emotionalism, and argued for the necessity of confronting the fundamental questions about Hiroshima.<sup>2</sup> In the end, the Smithsonian removed the commentary. At root, these "history wars" reflected a lack of national closure on questions about the use of the bomb. Revisionists contend that the use of the bomb can best be understood as an opening salvo in the post-war competition with the Soviet Union. Traditionalists continue to insist that the bomb was used to speed the end of the war and to avoid the certain heavy loss of U.S. lives which would have resulted from the planned invasion of the Japanese main islands. This paper attempts to step away from the emotionalism and examine the legacies, assumptions and decisions which led to the dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima August 6, 1945. It proceeds from the notion that such weighty national security decisions are rarely matters of "either/or" but are more often the result of a complex interaction of personalities, bureaucracies, perceptions and preferences.

## The House That F D R Built

**Building a Bomb** An analysis of the decision to use of the atom-bomb must begin well before the few short months between Truman's sudden assumption of presidential

authority and August 6, 1945. The process actually began in the U.S. in the growing concern shared by a group of émigré scientists that German advances in nuclear fission would allow the Nazis to realize the near-term development of an atomic weapon. German advances in nuclear science from 1938 on convinced one such scientist, Hungarian émigré Leo Szilard<sup>3</sup> that an accelerated effort had to be made to develop a capability to counter the Nazi potential and, if necessary, to respond to the possible use of an atomic weapon. In their more expansive moments, the scientists also thought that such new and powerful weapons ultimately would contribute to development of an international regime for nuclear control which could be the beginning of a world government and end to war.<sup>4</sup> However, the Nazi threat was more immediate and in 1939, working through Albert Einstein and Roosevelt confidant Alfred Sachs, Szilard obtained FDR's approval for an exploratory program on nuclear fission. FDR established the Advisory Committee on Uranium and funded it with an start-up grant of \$6000.<sup>5</sup> Initial work was slow, impeded by a military skepticism regarding the scientists' claims for the potential of fission and by the increasing diversions of a growing war in Europe.

The May 1940 German conquest of Belgium gave the Nazis access to uranium supplies in Belgian Africa and spurred an expansion of the U.S. program. In June, the Uranium Committee was absorbed by the National Defense Research Council, giving the nuclear fission research a new base and better claim on scarce scientific funding.<sup>6</sup> The program continued to focus on both the peaceful and wartime applications of fission. In 1941, British researchers' conclusions that a that a uranium bomb could be constructed and the German launch of Operation Barbarossa led to a shift in the U.S. program's

emphasis to a concentration on weaponry. However, advocates of a fission weapon still had to overcome continued concerns that a weapon could not be delivered in time to affect the war and that development efforts would only divert critical scientific and industrial capacities and resources. Briefing the prospect of a nuclear weapon to FDR, an optimistic Vannevar Bush, FDR's Scientific Advisor, argued that the bomb "could be a decisive instrument, capable of winning the war and shaping the peace"<sup>7</sup>

In October 1941, FDR sanctioned a major research program to determine the feasibility and cost of building an atom bomb and placed the program under Bush. FDR understood the potential of the bomb and its possible use to "speed the end of the war, strengthen American power and influence the shape of peace"<sup>8</sup>. He also understood the policy implications and, true to form, restricted policy decisions to a small Top Policy Group consisting of Vice President Wallace, Secretary of War Stimson, Army Chief Marshall, Bush and NDRC Chair Conant. The program was to be kept secret from the enemy, the public and most of the government, including then Senator Truman, and would be funded from a special source which the President undertook to secure.<sup>9</sup> The scientific community which had petitioned for the program would now be relegated to the job of building a weapon. This change did not set well with all, and particularly not with Szilard, who would continue to struggle against the scientists' abdication of responsibility. Still, FDR's decision was made and in a little less than two months, the Japanese attacked at Pearl Harbor. The U.S. was in the war.

The prospect of a German bomb continued to drive the U.S. program. Unbeknownst to the U.S. and British, by June 1942 the Germans had determined that an atomic bomb

could not be brought to bear in the war.<sup>10</sup> In September 1942, the War Department was given the responsibility of building a bomb, and General Leslie Groves was selected to head the Manhattan Project and to organize the work of the scientists. The investment of so large a portion of national resources (ultimately \$2 billion) in uncertain technologies and the possibility of failure haunted the program until August 6, 1945. As the war wore on, fear of the German threat would continue to drive the program although thoughts of the possible use of an atomic bomb on Japan began to take shape as Germany weakened. The Manhattan Project was about building bombs and the assumption was that they would be used in war when ready.

FDR's insistence on secrecy became a key focus for Groves. Groves was charged to be watchful not only for German espionage but also for Soviet. This charge reflected FDR's acceptance of the necessity of an alliance with the Soviets, but also his distrust of them. In December 1942, suspicion of the Soviets even led FDR to restrict the U S - British exchange on the nuclear program out of concern that an Anglo- Soviet treaty would result in a compromise of U S research.<sup>11</sup> Reassured by a furious Churchill, he overrode incipient arguments from his advisors about the importance of nuclear independence excluding even the UK and reaffirmed U S-Anglo cooperation. In Quebec, in August 1943, FDR concluded an executive agreement with Churchill which provided that nuclear weapons would not be used against each other and that they would be used against third parties only by mutual consent. Although scientists like Neils Bohr anticipated that nuclear weapons would contribute to the development a completely new world and the prospect for an end to war and, accordingly argued the necessity of

informing the Soviets,<sup>12</sup> FDR also insisted on a commitment not to communicate information about the program except by mutual consent.<sup>13</sup> Exclusion of the Soviets was reaffirmed in UK/U S agreements of July 1944 for cooperation in seeking control of the ores necessary for an atomic bomb. It was further affirmed at Hyde Park in September 1944 by an agreement which rejected proposals to share information aimed toward obtaining international control of atomic weapons. In spite of intensive security measures surrounding the Manhattan Project, by 1943 the principal U.S. decision-makers were convinced that the Soviets were spying on their efforts. Even with this knowledge, as late as December 1944, neither Roosevelt nor Secretary of War Stimson thought the time had come to share information with the Soviets.<sup>14</sup> Preserving the mantle of secrecy would slow Soviet efforts and avoid bringing demanding Soviets into the nuclear partnership. The decision on sharing information would be taken out of their hands by Klaus Fuchs, a scientist who was alarmed by the Nazi menace, attracted by the promise of communism, and convinced that European peace could only be assured if the Soviets also had atomic secrets.<sup>15</sup>

**Aerial Bombardment: Movement Toward Douhet** U S opposition to the “inhuman” bombing of cities had been sparked by Japanese actions in Shanghai in 1937 and those of Spanish Fascists in Barcelona in 1938.<sup>16</sup> Responding to Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939, FDR called for a pledge by all governments engaged in hostilities to pledge not to undertake “bombings of civilian populations or of unfortified cities.”<sup>17</sup> Although the UK repudiated its pledge in response to German bombing of Warsaw, the UK and Germany did not exchange bombing raids until May 1940, following a German



attack on Rotterdam. In response, the UK sent 99 bombers against rail and supply sites in the Ruhr and Hitler ordered the Luftwaffe to prepare a full-scale offensive against the British homeland. By late August, following an attack on Liverpool and a counterattack on Berlin the aerial campaigns had begun in full. Technological and equipment limitations drove both nations to less accurate night raids against large targets, cities. Thus began a shift in the direction of the use of strategic airpower directly against civilian workers. The logic of bombing factories was augmented to include the logic of bombing the workers essential to making the factories run with the objective of undermining morale and the willingness to continue war.

Alliance politics also contributed to the shift to greater acceptability of "civilian casualties. At first, strategic bombing was the only feasible offensive capability the UK could bring to bear in support of the alliance. As the war spread in Europe and the USSR carried the greater burden, reduction in the bombing effort would undermine UK and U S credibility and weaken the arguments for delaying the opening of a second front.<sup>18</sup> The U S focused on costly daylight precision raids until late in the war, while the UK's Bomber Command continued to find institutional rationale and effectiveness in night bombing focused on the "morale of the enemy civil population and in particular, of the industrial workers."<sup>19</sup> In January 1943 at the Casablanca Conference, Roosevelt and Churchill agreed on the British plan for continuation of the aerial war of attrition and the effort to undermine enemy morale and fatally weaken capacity for continued resistance. "Nazis and Japs" had started the war and were fighting it in a dirty fashion, and FDR and Churchill agreed that the Allies had to respond with everything they had. Hamburg

would feel the blow and Dresden would follow later. In the Pacific, once the island hopping campaign had moved U S B-29s within range of the home islands, so would Tokyo.

**Unconditional Surrender.** The final structural element of Roosevelt's policy was the demand for unconditional surrender by Germany and Japan. Although the policy was announced at the Casablanca Conference in January 1943, FDR had agreed as early as May 1942 with his State Department that the war should be fought until Germany and Japan unconditionally surrendered. As Assistant Secretary of the Navy at the end of WWI, and president at the outbreak of WWII, Roosevelt was well aware of the "stab in the back" perspective of German militarists and of its consequences. Questioned on unconditional surrender at a press conference in 1944, Roosevelt commented: "Practically all Germans deny the fact that they surrendered during the last war, but this time they are going to know it. And so are the Japs."<sup>20</sup>

Critics argued that unconditional surrender hardened the position of militarists and provided grist for the propaganda mills, thus countering campaigns against enemy morale. Yet unconditional surrender satisfied a need for a broad statement of objectives able to hold a fragile allied coalition together. It also reassured the Soviets in their concern regarding a second front. Roosevelt resisted calls to define or clarify the term contending that "whatever words we might agree on would have to be modified or changed the first time some nation wanted to surrender."<sup>21</sup> Modification would only undermine attainment of a lasting peace. Still, even at Casablanca, Roosevelt indicated that unconditional

surrender did not imply the destruction of populations, but of “philosophies based on the conquest and subjugation of other people”<sup>22</sup>

Unconditional surrender was also of value in motivating and holding American will and morale together. It satisfied a national and democratic need for a crusade to justify involvement. America sought lasting resolution, an end to the horrors and menace of Nazi Germany. In the Pacific, the American psyche had also been deeply seared by Japanese action in China and by the attack on Pearl Harbor. As the war progressed, reports of show trials, pictures of Japanese execution of prisoners, and the Baatan Death March coupled with the increasing costs of the island hopping campaign added support to the demand for unconditional surrender.

In February 1945, an ailing Roosevelt met Stalin and Churchill at Yalta. Roosevelt rejected Churchill’s proposal to invite the Soviets to join in the call for unconditional surrender. He did not accept the argument that confronted with such unity, Japan might seek some mitigation of the full rigor of unconditional surrender. FDR doubted the Japanese would bow to the ultimatum and would not wake up until their islands had felt the “full weight of air attack”<sup>23</sup>. Instead, at Yalta, Roosevelt negotiated an agreement which offered concessions in eastern Europe and the Pacific to obtain a Soviet promise to join the Pacific war once victory was complete in Europe.

**The House Completed:**<sup>24</sup> Thus, FDR built the policies which were Truman’s inheritance. FDR’s legacies were many. He decided to build the bomb and accepted that once developed the bomb would be used to speed the end of the war. The program of development would be an exclusive U S -Anglo partnership. As the war in Europe wound

to a close, work on the bomb continued as FDR and his advisors shifted their attention to the Pacific. Meeting at Hyde Park in September, 1944, FDR and Churchill agreed that “when a bomb is finally available, it might perhaps, after mature consideration, be used against the Japanese, who should be warned that this bombardment would be repeated until they surrender.”<sup>25</sup>

The Casablanca endorsement of the UK Bomber Command’s war of attrition reflected U.S. decision-makers’ quiet adjustment to the consequences of civilian deaths. The adjustment was also reflected in the September 1944 establishment of the 509<sup>th</sup> Composite Group, whose orders were to prepare for the delivery of the bomb on Japan. Finally, it was reflected in LeMay’s March 1945 incendiary bombings of Tokyo. If need be, the bomb would be used to deal with the tenacious Japanese militarists and bring Japanese compliance with the requirement of unconditional surrender. Saving American lives would be a potent incentive.

In his decision to exclude the Soviets, FDR had also set the framework for consideration of the diplomatic possibilities of the bomb. Soviet pledges of assistance in Asia had been secured at Yalta based on a recognition of “Soviet interests.” Soviet violations of the Yalta agreement added to FDR’s doubts about their reliability and to his inclination to move away from the use of “carrots” and toward realization of some leverage from possession of the atomic weapon.

#### Living in the House that FDR Built: Truman and the Bomb

Roosevelt’s sudden death thrust an unprepared Harry Truman into the presidency. Truman had little sense of his predecessor’s handling of foreign affairs and even less of his

intentions. In the midst of crisis and uncertain of his footing, he initially was dependent on Roosevelt's team for advice and direction. With so little background and few pressures for reconsideration, he was driven toward a reaffirmation of the existing policies of an extremely popular president. The air campaign and naval blockade against Japan would continue as would the campaign bringing U.S. ground forces closer to the home islands. On April 16, four days after assuming the presidency, Truman reaffirmed the commitment to unconditional surrender.<sup>26</sup> While recognizing the difficulty of the quid pro quo approach, he would pursue compliance on the Yalta Agreement following FDR's apparent intention to harden his response to Stalin's demands, at least with respect to eastern Europe. Briefed by Secretary Stimson on April 25 on the details of the Manhattan Project and the near-term, but still uncertain, prospect of an atomic bomb, he offered no opposition to the assumption that it would be used. Thus, bureaucratic momentum helped propel forward the plans for employment of the bomb against Japan. The key decisions were not whether, but how the bomb would be used. The question of "how" became a tangle of many policy issues, none of which contradicted the inherited assumptions.

**Invasion or the Bomb: A Self-Imposed Dilemma?** By April 1945 the long and costly Pacific campaign had brought Allied forces within striking distance of the Japanese home islands. The U.S. Navy had mounted an effective blockade and Japanese freedom of movement was nil. U.S. airpower dominated Japanese airspace and the March 1945, incendiary bombing destroyed 16 square miles of Tokyo, killing a minimum of 84,000. With the collapse of resistance on bloody Iwo Jima, the U.S. secured bases from which the

shorter range U S fighters could provide cover for the B-29 raids On April 1, 1945 the U.S Tenth Army landed on Okinawa

Japan faced a grave crisis and many senior U S military men thought her defeated and nearing collapse. U S airpower advocates believed Japan could be bombed into submission, while naval proponents believed that a continuation of the blockade would be sufficient, a view not shared by the Army<sup>27</sup> The mounting toll of U S casualties on Okinawa and the large scale use of kamikazes there foretold the consequences of a full-scale invasion of the home islands<sup>28</sup> That same month the Soviets announced their intention to terminate the Neutrality Pact with Japan. Beleaguered Japan, though bowed, was not prepared to surrender and showed no signs of willingness to comply with the allied demand for unconditional surrender Truman's rejection of "partial victory" in his April 16 speech before Congress set the political and military objective in the Pacific and framed the U S. military's task

**Invasion** On June 18, at Truman's request the Joint Chiefs briefed the President on the invasion plans In his tasking, Admiral Leahy, Truman's military advisor, stressed that the President intended to make his decision on the campaign with the "purpose of economizing to the maximum extent possible in the loss of American lives"<sup>29</sup> General Marshall and the Chiefs briefed a plan for a two phased invasion beginning with southern Kyushu on Nov 1, followed by Honshu and the Tokyo plain in March.<sup>30</sup> Convinced that the air campaign and sea blockade would be sufficient, Adm. Leahy argued that invasion would be unnecessary. However, the Chiefs viewed the June 8 decision in Japan to "prosecute the war to the bitter end" as an indication that Japan would have to be taken<sup>31</sup>

Using existing information on likely Japanese defenses, they anticipated campaign losses of 40,000 dead, 150,000 wounded and 3,500 MIA. Truman endorsed the plan but expressed the hope that “there was a possibility for preventing an Okinawa from one end of Japan to the other.”<sup>32</sup>

Subsequent intelligence gathered from MAGIC intercepts of Japanese military message traffic indicated a continuous increase of Japanese defense forces on Kyushu and an extensive training for kamikaze attacks at all levels. By August, the Japanese had transformed Kyushu into a defensive bastion, with estimates of some 600,000 soldiers and sailors and 6-7,000 aircraft ready to oppose 650,000 Americans. In reality, Japanese forces approximated 900,000 soldiers and 8,500 aircraft.<sup>33</sup> Truman and his advisors would not have missed the implications of this build-up for their invasion plans.

**The Atomic Bomb** In 1942 FDR had oriented the U S nuclear program to rapid production of a weapon. As Manhattan Project Director General Groves stated, “The fact remains that the original decision to make the project an all-out effort was based upon using it to end the war.”<sup>34</sup> The momentum of the project carried it forward. In early spring 1945, Marshall gave Groves permission to begin target selection. As noted above, Truman was briefed on the project by Secretary of War Stimson of April 25 and sometime earlier by Secretary of State-designate Byrnes. Ultimately, the decision on usage was Truman’s and Groves reported that the President’s decision was “one of non-interference--basically, a decision not to upset existing plans.”<sup>35</sup>

The costs of Okinawa were a daily fact for the new president and the bomb held the promise of an avoidance of an even more costly invasion. To borrow from Bernstein,

given the patriotic calculus of the time, there was no hesitation about using the bomb to kill many Japanese in order to save Americans<sup>36</sup> As the estimates of numbers of defenders on the home islands rose, so too would the estimates of projected casualties Considering possible political consequences, President Truman could ill afford to forego the use of the atomic bomb. The public would not have understood a presidential decision not to use a weapon in which the government had invested \$2 billion and which would save American lives, as well as speed the end of the war. As Truman later put it, the “question was whether we wanted to save many American lives and Japanese lives or whether we wanted... to win the war by killing all our young men”<sup>37</sup> By August, the MAGIC intercepts gave evidence of mounting Japanese defenses which would mean a concomitant increase in the costs of invasion This would give the President even less reason to question use of the bomb<sup>38</sup> Yet, even with the prospect of the bomb, the policy-makers remained uncertain of its performance, of whether it could bring Japan to surrender, and unsure of the support they would need and seek from Russia in ending the war

#### Alternatives?

**Demonstration and Warning for Japan:** During his April 25 briefing on the bomb, Stimson urged the President to form a special committee to “develop recommendations to the executive and legislative branches when secrecy is no longer in effect”<sup>39</sup> Stimson’s Interim Committee (IC) comprised of himself, Secretary of State designate Byrnes, Assistant SecState Clayton, Navy Secretary Bard, and the scientific team of Bush and Conant quickly began to work on draft declarations to be employed after the bomb fell.



Although “how” was not a part of the IC agenda, a meeting on May 31 briefly considered whether Japan should be warned with a non-combatant demonstration of the weapon. The uncertainty of the technology, likelihood of Japanese interference with a demonstration, and the strengthening of Japanese resolve resulting from possible failure led the group to reject warning. The IC essentially endorsed the work of the Targeting Committee which had been convened by General Groves two weeks earlier.<sup>40</sup> The Targeting Committee had urged that the targets be places the “bombing of which would most adversely impact the will of the people to continue the war.”<sup>41</sup> The IC was unanimous in its conclusion that a single plane dropping a single bomb without warning on a city with a vital war plant closely surrounded by workers houses would achieve maximum psychological effect.<sup>42</sup> They briefed Truman on June 1 and the President agreed that while it was regrettable, the “only reasonable conclusion was to use the bomb.”<sup>43</sup>

On June 12, scientists in the Chicago Metallurgy lab forwarded a recommendation to the IC’s Scientific Sub-Panel which urged a demonstration and warned that the military advantages of use might be outweighed by the “ensuing loss of confidence and a wave of horror and repulsion.”<sup>44</sup> The Chicago scientists were led by Szilard, who in the aftermath of the victory in Europe and end of the Nazi atomic threat was less certain that the bomb should be employed against Japan. Arthur Conant, member of the IC, and Robert J. Oppenheimer, who believed such matters were better left to the politicians, rejected the recommendation advising the Interim Committee that they could “propose no technical demonstration likely to bring an end to the war.”<sup>45</sup> At the time, technical uncertainty and senior-level acceptance of the IC consensus made reconsideration improbable.

The call for warning did not fade. Learning of Japanese peace-feelers, Stimson shifted his position and urged warning before use.<sup>46</sup> Assistant Secretary of War McCloy made another plea for warning in a June 18 meeting<sup>47</sup> and Under Secretary of the Navy Bard, believing Japan was looking for a way, out urged warning in a June 27 memo.<sup>48</sup> Finally, Szilard tried one last modified petition in mid-July.<sup>49</sup> These calls for advance warning again were rejected as entailing an unnecessary military risk. Instead, Stimson was set the task of developing a warning following the use of the first bomb.

#### **Modifications to Unconditional Surrender: The Emperor and Peace Feelers:**

Concerns with a possible public backlash and with actions which might strengthen Japanese resistance also militated against receptivity to Japanese "peace-feelers" and ultimately, against suggestions to modify "unconditional surrender" to accommodate concerns with the post-war status of the emperor. As noted above, unconditional surrender had been laid out by FDR and had become the popular touchstone. The extent of popular blame of the emperor was evident in a Gallup poll taken in June 1945 in which 33% of the respondents wanted the emperor executed as a war criminal, 11% wanted him imprisoned and 9% wanted him exiled, while only 7% favored his retention.<sup>50</sup>

Reaffirmation of the "simple" terms of unconditional surrender avoided political risks for an uncertain Truman. However in the months prior to Hiroshima, the President did not curtail discussion of possible modification which might offer some guarantee of the status of the emperor.

Undersecretary of State Joseph C. Grew was the most persistent and vocal advocate of guarantees for the emperor's status. He argued such guarantees would speed surrender

and perhaps render invasion unnecessary. Grew and Stimson together had worked a clarification in Truman's May 8 VE Day speech which called for the "unconditional surrender of the armed forces,"<sup>51</sup> however, Truman latter returned to the un-nuanced unconditional surrender. Although Assistant Secretaries MacLeish and Acheson, who regarded the emperor as the mainstay of Japanese militarism opposed him, Grew broached the subject of compromise with Truman in late May and, at the President's direction, discussed it with Stimson, Marshall, Forrestal and Admiral King.<sup>52</sup> All agreed that some modification might be necessary, but they also agreed with Marshall that it would be premature to announce a compromise while fighting continued on Okinawa.

On June 18, Grew again saw Truman, who later admitted that he thought unconditional surrender might drag out the war but was unwilling to take action to change public opinion. He postponed a decision until a more propitious time, later deciding it would best be discussed at the Potsdam meeting.<sup>53</sup> On July 2, Stimson provided Truman his Proposed Program for Japan including a draft of a possible compromise which would not "exclude a constitutional monarchy under her [Japan's] present dynasty."<sup>54</sup> Characterizing his proposal as "equivalent to unconditional surrender" Stimson advised that the compromise might avoid the fanatical resistance expected in the face of a U.S. invasion.

Sworn in on July 3, Secretary of State Byrnes was warned of Stimson's proposal by Acheson and MacLeish. Byrnes referred the proposal to former Secretary of State Hull, who responded that it smacked of "appeasement."<sup>55</sup> In a follow-on opinion telegraphed to Byrnes while the Sec State was en-route to Potsdam, Hull added that the Japanese might

reject the compromise even if it allowed the emperor to remain on his throne. Hull warned that this would strengthen the militarists and that “terrible political repercussions would follow in the U.S.” He suggested that it would be better to await the climax of the air campaign and Russian entry into the war.<sup>56</sup> Hull’s advice coincided with Byrnes’ belief that compromise would not be tolerated by the public.

The Joint Chiefs also opposed Stimson’s proposal although for different reasons. Reviewing it at Potsdam, they shared Marshall’s concern that its wording could be construed to imply that Hirohito would be deposed or executed. They favored a more general statement which would not remove the possibility of “using the authority of the emperor to direct a surrender of the Japanese forces in the outlying areas as well as Japan proper.”<sup>57</sup>

**Peace Feelers:** Japanese efforts to explore possibilities for peace were primarily focused on the Soviets and the hope of leveraging Soviet influence as possible intermediaries. They believed a Soviet brokered plan would be more favorable to Japan and Japan’s Ambassador sought indications of how far his leaders would go in making concessions to the Soviets.<sup>58</sup> Truman and his key advisors were privy to Japanese diplomatic and military traffic through the MAGIC intercepts, which revealed a flurry of mixed signals regarding possible surrender terms. Analysis of these intercepts was made more difficult by the ambiguities of Japanese *haragei*--the art of saying one thing while meaning another.<sup>59</sup> In general, the intercepted MAGIC messages and reports from U.S. ambassadors were not read as signaling a clear Japanese willingness to make concessions necessary to meet U.S. demands. Instead, the Japanese messages were interpreted as

demonstrating a continued willingness by some to move toward peace, a continued inhibition by the military and an inability to be specific<sup>60</sup>

At Potsdam, Stimson's proposed compromise was modified to thread the line between a signal to Japan and a political judgment of what would be acceptable at home. The Potsdam Declaration issued on July 26 reaffirmed the requirement for unconditional surrender and anticipated a "peacefully inclined and responsible government established in accordance with the freely expressed will of the Japanese people."<sup>61</sup> It made no promise regarding the emperor nor did it specifically address the peace feelers which were focused on his retention and which fell short of American expectations of concrete indications of willingness to surrender and accept the fact of defeat. Domestic and international politics demanded ambiguity.

The Japanese government responded to the Declaration with *mokusatsu*, a *haragei* which could mean a decision to withhold comment, consider the Declaration "unworthy of public notice," or to treat it with contempt.<sup>62</sup> In the highly charged atmosphere following Potsdam and in light of the successful test of the bomb on July 16, Truman and Byrnes saw in *mokusatsu* a confirmation of their belief that peace would require use of the atomic bomb.

**Playing the Soviet Card:** At Yalta, FDR had supported the Soviets' insistence on concessions in China in order to obtain a promise of Soviet entry into the Pacific war. Stalin promised entry within 2-3 months of VE Day, pending agreement to a pact ratifying Soviet interests in Manchuria. At that time, Soviet entry was considered essential to tie down the Japanese northern forces and decrease anticipated resistance to the planned

invasion. By April 1945 when the Soviets informed Japan that they were terminating their neutrality pact, success in the U S sea blockade and air campaign and the uncertain promise of the bomb had reduced but not eliminated the perceived need for Soviet assistance

Truman assumed the presidency early in a reexamination of the deal made with Stalin at Yalta. Clashes over the governance and boundaries of Poland, German reparations and Balkan issues had strained the alliance. Concerns over apparent Soviet "violations" of Yalta had led FDR to write Churchill and state that the military situation would soon "permit us to become "tougher" than has heretofore appeared advantageous to the war effort "<sup>63</sup> While Stimson and Marshall cautioned against a rupture with the Soviets, Truman was bolstered in his determination to get tough with the Soviets by his perception that Stalin could be dealt with like a "party boss" (a breed with whom Truman had experience). More important was the advice of Byrnes and Averell Harriman, Ambassador to the USSR, who urged him to stand up to the Soviets. They were supported by General John Deane, Commander of the Military Mission in Moscow, who indicated that the Soviets would enter the Pacific war when they able and urged the President to remain firm.<sup>64</sup> Announcing his intent to end one-way agreements, Truman used his first meeting with Foreign Minister Molotov to lecture the Soviets on American expectations in terms that even Harriman thought harsh<sup>65</sup>

While Truman and Byrnes wrestled with the heritage of Yalta, progress on the bomb continued. Complying with its charter to consider implications for a time when secrecy was no longer required, the IC took up the critical question of whether the Soviets should

be informed about the bomb before its use against Japan. Anticipating Soviet development of a bomb within 4 years, Bush and Conant pushed for informing the Soviets to avoid a future arms race and bring the atomic weapons under international control. Their argument flew in the face of the Anglo-American monopoly cemented by FDR and was opposed by Groves, who countered that the Soviets were not four, but twenty years behind. Persuaded by Groves whose argument was closer to his own predisposition, Byrnes advised Truman that the Russians should not be told until the first bomb had been laid successfully on Japan.<sup>66</sup>

Undeterred, Bush and Connant on June 21 persuaded the IC to reverse itself. The IC recommend that, should the occasion arise at Potsdam, the President should advise the Soviets in general terms "that we were working on this weapon and expected to use it against Japan" and should avoid offering any additional details.<sup>67</sup> Viewing the bomb as an enticement to postwar international cooperation and potentially improved conditions within the USSR, Stimson agreed. Byrnes grudgingly agreed although he remained concerned with a possible Soviet request for atomic partnership and thought warning might push the Soviets to an early attack on Manchuria.<sup>68</sup> He believed that the U.S. should keep ahead of the Soviets and use the bomb to put "us in a position to dictate terms for the end of the war."<sup>69</sup> Although uncertain of the bomb's potential as a diplomatic lever, in May Truman decided to postpone the Potsdam meeting to mid July, ostensibly to allow him to focus on the budget, but more likely to wait for the bomb.<sup>70</sup> At the same time, he hedged his bets by announcing his intention to secure Soviet entry into the Pacific war.<sup>71</sup>

Byrnes was perhaps the most concerned with bringing the war in Japan to a close before the Soviets could get too deeply involved. He likely was aware that in May the State Department had asked the War Department whether Russian involvement was so necessary that the U.S. should abide by the Far East portions of the Yalta Agreement. At the time, Stimson had replied that the Soviets would enter of their own accord and on their own schedule and that Russian aid would be "useful, but not necessary" if the U.S. invaded.<sup>72</sup> Byrnes suspected Soviet intentions to get in on the peace after the U.S. had carried the burden of the war. Perhaps the most closely attuned of Truman's advisors to the domestic pulse, he worried about the domestic political consequences of acceding to the terms of Yalta, which would establish a Soviet sphere of interest in Manchuria and run counter to the long-standing Open Door policy in China.

News of the successful test of the bomb encouraged Byrnes. In spite of the warning that it might not be enough to bring Japanese surrender, Byrnes saw the test as offering the promise that at a minimum, Soviet involvement could be limited and more optimistically could be prevented altogether. Truman also believed that the bomb would make Soviet entry less crucial and shared Byrnes' concern with the future of China. Still uncertain, Truman went to Potsdam to secure all possible Russian assistance. News of the successful test at Alamogordo made it unnecessary to offer concession to secure Russian entry, which Truman believed would happen anyway. The results of the test certainly contributed to a stiffening of the U.S. negotiating position at Potsdam as evidenced by Byrnes' tougher stance on reparations and other European issues. Buoyed by the success



Byrnes also encouraged Chinese Foreign Minister Soong to stand firm on the terms of the Sino-Soviet agreement.<sup>73</sup>

On July 24, with British concurrence, Truman casually informed Stalin that the U.S. had developed a weapon of “unusual destructive force”<sup>74</sup> Stalin replied that he was “glad to hear it and hoped we would make good use of it against the Japanese”<sup>75</sup> It was not the kind of exchange which Stimson or the IC envisioned. Instead, Truman’s casual approach was politically expedient and aimed at integrating the complex intentions to defer Soviet entry into the war, reach some accommodation on China, preserve the ability to use the weapon as a tool for shaping postwar realities, and avoid a discussion of details for which neither the President nor his key advisors were prepared. It may be argued that the details were unnecessary. Stalin knew of the U.S. program and immediately afterward directed that his leading nuclear physicist would have to speed things up.<sup>76</sup>

In the final steps of this intricate dance, Truman and Byrnes with British and Chinese concurrence decided not to invite the Soviets to sign the Potsdam Declaration and informed the Soviets of the contents of their declaration on Japan only two hours before its release. While the decision reflected the general stiffening of the U.S. position, it also involved a rejection of Molotov’s request that the Allies formally invite the USSR into the war. Politically, Truman and Byrnes wanted to avoid the appearance of asking the Soviets for a favor.<sup>77</sup> On August 8, the Soviet Red Army rolled into Manchuria.

### **A Question of Morality:**

In Just and Unjust Wars, Michael Walzer asks “Can soldiers and statesmen override the rights of innocent people for the sake of their own community?”<sup>78</sup> He responds that in

circumstances of “supreme emergency” the imminence of unusual and horrifying danger may require soldiers and statesmen to take actions that the conventions of war ban. He adds that “the mere recognition of such a threat is not itself coercive, it neither compels nor permits attacks on the innocent as long as other means of fighting and winning are available”<sup>79</sup>

Using this criteria, Walzer acknowledges the technological reasons prompting the British decision to resort to area bombing but believes the “immeasurable evil” of a Nazi triumph and Great Britain’s lack of another option before 1942 created a “supreme emergency” He criticizes continuation of area bombing beyond 1942 as unnecessary He holds that continuation was driven by a utilitarian motivation to obtain a quick and less costly victory Walzer also asserts that this utilitarian accounting was at the root of the use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima He contends that the bomb was used in spite of the fact that Japan was already defeated and neither posed an imminent danger nor constituted an immeasurable evil. Thus, he concludes that the use of the atomic bomb could not be justified as response to a condition of supreme emergency<sup>80</sup>

That Truman and his advisors considered the moral questions was reflected in the President’s direction on July 25 that the bomb should be targeted against military objectives and soldiers and sailors.<sup>81</sup> Yet the President also approved the IC recommendation that the bomb be used in a way to produce the greatest psychological effect and overcome the Japanese will to continue the war. Walzer contends that the objective of unconditional surrender created a self-imposed dilemma of invade or bomb, which underlay but could not justify an argument of necessity Yet it was this perceived

necessity which led to the U S calculation of relative good/lesser evil Truman and his advisors were motivated a calculus which emphasized the number of U S and Japanese lives which ultimately would be saved by avoiding a drawn out, potentially more costly invasion For Truman and most of his closest advisors, and the public the war was a crusade. The U.S had fought for years against a Japan responsible for Pearl Harbor, the Baatan Death March and a mounting toll in U S lives fighting against an aggressor state FDR had committed the nation to a defeat of Japanese militarism. Perhaps Japan was not the evil that Nazi Germany was but it was seen as an evil and U S sacrifices called for definitive results. War was total and the objective was military victory measured in terms of unconditional surrender of the enemy.<sup>82</sup>

Given the uncertainties of demonstration, the ambiguities of peace feelers (intentional and perceived) and the lack of assurance that even Russian entry would obviate the need for invasion, the decision makers believed they did face a necessity<sup>83</sup> Thus, for the decision makers the moral calculation was that use of the bomb would be the lesser evil As Stimson later wrote.

The decision to use the atomic bomb was a decision that brought death to over a hundred thousand Japanese No explanation can change that fact.. But this deliberate, premeditated destruction was our least abhorrent choice It stopped the fire raids and the strangling blockade; it ended the ghastly specter of a clash of great land armies<sup>84</sup>

Even with this justification some Americans could not accept the decision. As social critic Dwight MacDonald wrote in 1945, "those who wield such destructive

power are outcasts from humanity.”<sup>85</sup> For MacDonald and other critics like Szilard, the bomb had not been used as a weapon of last resort. Perhaps the acceptance of area bombing and of the Tokyo incendiary bombing, mixed with the concept of total war and the spirit of crusade, help to explain the decision. Revisionist who focus on missed opportunities and paths intentionally not taken (modification of unconditional surrender, peace feelers and Russian options) challenge the legitimacy of recourse to the moral justification of necessity. Those like Alperovitz, who argue that the bomb was not directed against Japan, but against Russia,<sup>86</sup> remove any moral underpinning from the decision and place it solely in the realm of cynical realpolitik. This review has tried to demonstrate that the answer is gray rather than black or white. Moralists may not be content with that color.

#### Conclusion:

The Japanese response of *mokusatsu* to the Potsdam Declaration provided the final justification for use of the bomb. The stage thus set, on August 6, 1945 the *Enola Gay* completed its mission and the U.S. ushered in the nuclear age. The Truman Administration had not challenged the inherited assumption that the atom bomb would be used. An uncertain Truman had relied on a small, close circle of advisors, many of whom had been a part of the development of the bomb and of the consensus that it should be employed. The bomb primarily would be employed to speed the war and to save American lives, a cause that took on growing importance as the MAGIC intercepts raised estimates of the likely cost of invasion. No president could have ignored this factor and the \$2 billion price-tag and chosen not to use the bomb and expected to withstand the

domestic outcry once the bomb's existence became public. Commitment to unconditional surrender did inure the decision-makers to other possibilities. The ambiguity of Japanese peace-feelers and the perceived intransigence of the militarists further convinced decision-makers of the necessity to employ the weapon for its psychological effect. Secondly, use of the bomb also would delay Soviet entry into the war and aid U.S. efforts to secure Soviet concessions, help preserve the Open Door, and provide a lever on postwar U S /Soviet relations. Ultimately, Truman and his advisors perceived no cause to reexamine their inherited assumptions. The answers to the complex questions which arose from April through August 1945 served to ratify the many choices made long before.

The furor caused by the proposed display of the *Enola Gay* and by the Smithsonian commentary vividly demonstrates that the U S has not come to a final verdict on the necessity of the use of the bomb and the underlying, still sensitive moral questions. Regardless of the reason for use, the chore since has been to contain the potential for nuclear weapons to become "death, the destroyer of worlds"<sup>87</sup> The quandary was captured in a September 1945 memo from Stimson to the President

I think the bomb . constitutes merely a first step in a new control by man over the forces of nature too revolutionary and dangerous to fit into the old concepts I Think it really caps the climax of the race between man's growing technical power for destructiveness and his psychological power of self-control...his moral power.<sup>88</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> Ian Buruma, "The War Over the Bomb," New York Review of Books, 42/14 (September 21, 1995), 28
- <sup>2</sup> Gar Alperovitz, "Hiroshima Historians Reassess," Foreign Policy 99 (February 1995), 34
- <sup>3</sup> Richard Rhodes, The Making of the Bomb, (New York Simon and Schuster, Inc , 1986), 302 Szilard had worked out the possibility of a uranium and graphite based chain reaction
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid , 308
- <sup>5</sup> Dan Kurzman, Day of the Bomb, (New York Mc Graw Hill Book Company, 1986), 28
- <sup>6</sup> Rhodes, 338
- <sup>7</sup> Barton J Bernstein, "The Atomic Bomb and American Foreign Policy The Route to Hiroshima," The Atomic Bomb The Critical Issues, (Boston Little, Brown and Company, 1976), 96
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid , 97
- <sup>9</sup> Rhodes, 379
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid , 405
- <sup>11</sup> Bernstein "The Atomic Bomb and American Foreign Policy The Route to Hiroshima," The Atomic Bomb The Critical Issues , 98
- <sup>12</sup> Rhodes, 530-533
- <sup>13</sup> Robert J Maddox, Weapons for Victory The Hiroshima Decision Fifty Years Later, (Colombia, Missouri University of Missouri Press, 1995), 98-99
- <sup>14</sup> Bernstein, "The Atomic Bomb and American Foreign Policy The Route to Hiroshima," The Atomic Bomb The Critical Issues , 100
- <sup>15</sup> Kurzman, 216
- <sup>16</sup> Rhodes, 310
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid ,
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid , 469
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid , 470
- <sup>20</sup> Maddox, 11
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid , 8
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid , 6
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid , 12
- <sup>24</sup> See Bernstein, 'The Atomic Bomb and American Foreign Policy The Route to Hiroshima,' The Atomic Bomb The Critical Issues , for an excellent synopsis of the assumptions and legacies of the Roosevelt administration re the atomic bomb
- <sup>25</sup> Bernstein, "The Atomic Bombings Reconsidered," Foreign Affairs 74/1, (January/February 1995), 136
- <sup>26</sup> Gar Alperovitz, The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb, (New York Vintage Books, 1995), 39
- <sup>27</sup> Bernstein, "The Atomic Bomb and American Foreign Policy The Route to Hiroshima," The Atomic Bomb The Critical Issues , 115 Also see Alperovitz, The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb, Chpts 26-28 for military views on the capabilities of the various services and on the question of the necessity to invade or use the A-bomb Alperovitz builds his case against the requirement to use the A-bomb through a collection of impressive, if selective quotations Maddox, Bernstein and others mount equally convincing counter quotations
- <sup>28</sup> Maddox, 14
- <sup>29</sup> Thomas B Allen & Norman Polmar, Code Name Down-Fall, (New York Simon and Schuster, Inc , 1995), 203
- <sup>30</sup> Ronald H Spector, Eagle Against the Sun, ( New York. Vintage Books, 1985), 543
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid , 54
- <sup>32</sup> Robert H Ferrell, ed , Harry S Truman and the Bomb A Documentary History, (Worland, Wyoming High Plains Publishing Company, Inc , 1996), 5
- <sup>33</sup> Edward J Drea, MacArthur's ULTRA Code Breaking and the War Against Japan, 1942-1945, (Lawrence Kansas University Press of Kansas, 1992), 223
- <sup>34</sup> Leslie M Groves, Now It Can Be Told The Story of the Manhattan Project, (New York, Da Capo Press, 1983), 265
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid ,

<sup>36</sup> Bernstein, "The Atomic Bombings Reconsidered," Foreign Affairs, 74/1, (January/February 1995), 144  
 Note Bernstein uses the argument while discounting the "myth" of the expectation of 500,000 casualties from an invasion. While the Drea research cited above does not reach 500,000 it certainly climbs above the very limited figures of the 18 June assessment which the JCS provided and Alperovitz uses as the primary evidence of post war intentional "mythologizing" which he charges members of Truman's closest circle engaged in

<sup>37</sup> Maddox, 3

<sup>38</sup> Even using the 18 June figures it must be questioned whether any president could have chosen not to use the bomb if it meant a difference of 40,000 dead and 150,000 wounded

<sup>39</sup> Maddox, 29

<sup>40</sup> Rhodes, 627

<sup>41</sup> Maddox, 30

<sup>42</sup> Bernstein, "The Atomic Bombings Reconsidered," 144

<sup>43</sup> Maddox, 46

<sup>44</sup> Kurzman, 316

<sup>45</sup> Maddox, 64

<sup>46</sup> Bernstein, "The Atomic Bomb and American Foreign Policy," 118

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 105

<sup>48</sup> Maddox, 69-70

<sup>49</sup> Kurzman 390

<sup>50</sup> Spector, 545

<sup>51</sup> Allen and Polmar, 200

<sup>52</sup> Alperovitz, The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb, 47-48

<sup>53</sup> Bernstein, 'The Atomic Bomb and American Foreign Policy,' 118

<sup>54</sup> Rhodes, 683-684

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 685

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*,

<sup>57</sup> Bernstein, "The Atomic Bomb and American Foreign Policy The Route to Hiroshima," The Atomic Bomb The Critical Issues, 119 and Maddox, 96-97

<sup>58</sup> Allen and Polmar, 197

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 198 and see the work of historian Robert J C Butow

<sup>60</sup> Bernstein, "The Atomic Bomb and American Foreign Policy The Route to Hiroshima," The Atomic Bomb The Critical Issues, 120

<sup>61</sup> Maddox, 97

<sup>62</sup> Alperovitz, The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb, 400-401 and Kurzman, 402 Prime Minister Suzuki announced the decision for *mokusatsu* by stating at a press conference the Japan did not see much value in the Potsdam Declaration. Suzuki's statement might have left some ambiguity, but War Minister Anami later told the press that Suzuki meant to *reject* the Declaration by ignoring it

<sup>63</sup> Maddox, 17

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 21

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 29

<sup>66</sup> Bernstein, "The Atomic Bomb and American Foreign Policy," 106

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 107

<sup>68</sup> Kurzman, 373

<sup>69</sup> Maddox, 44

<sup>70</sup> Revisionists such as Alperovitz argue that the decision to use the bomb was based not on the potential loss of American lives, but primarily on a desire to manipulate postwar relations with the Soviets. Thus, Potsdam was delayed, peace-feelers were ignored, resolution of the Sino-Soviet issues delayed and other alternatives not pursued because they ran counter to this objective

<sup>71</sup> Bernstein, "The Atomic Bomb and American Foreign Policy," 109

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 108

<sup>73</sup> Alperovitz sees these events as further evidence that Truman and Byrnes intentionally delayed the resolution of the Sino-Soviet issues to allow the use of the bomb and set the post-war agenda.

<sup>74</sup> The U S and UK had agreed in 1944 at Hyde Park to consult on use and on sharing information. In early July, Churchill had been informed of the U S decision to use the atom bomb and had concurred

<sup>75</sup> Kurzman, 386

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 388

<sup>77</sup> Bernstein, "The Atomic Bomb and American Foreign Policy," 110

<sup>78</sup> Michael Walzer, Just and Unjust Wars, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1977), 254.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 254-255

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 263-268

<sup>81</sup> Maddox, 106

<sup>82</sup> Robert C. Batchelder, "Changing Ethics in the Crucible of War," in Paul R. Baker, The Atomic Bomb: The Great Decision, (Hinsdale, Illinois: The Dryden Press, 1976,)

<sup>83</sup> James T. Johnson, "Just War I: The Broken Tradition," The National Interest, Fall 1996, 34

<sup>84</sup> Henry L. Stimson, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb" in Bernstein, The Atomic Bomb: The Critical Issues, 17

<sup>85</sup> Dwight MacDonald "The Decline to 'Barbarism'" in Baker, The Atomic Bomb, 137

<sup>86</sup> In Walzer's calculation, Alperovitz' assertion that the U S only used the bomb to shape post-war relations with the Russians would make the use of the weapon an even less justifiable act. It would completely remove the justification of the concern with the cost in American and Japanese lives. It would paint Truman and particularly Byrnes as coldly calculating, callous politicians driven only by power politics. Alperovitz asserts too much influence for the anti-Soviet motivation too readily dismissing the powerful constraints of the domestic political environment, the heritage from FDR's administration and the real momentum of the Manhattan Project. His is a masterful assembling of sources, but he must still make many significant leaps and assumptions to arrive at his conclusion. Scholars like Maddox, Drea Allen and Polmar demonstrate that other interpretations are possible and that the battle of sources can never be the final basis for conclusion.

<sup>87</sup> Oppenheimer's comment on his reaction to witnessing the successful test at Trinity

<sup>88</sup> George L. Butler, "Time to End the Age of Nukes," The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, March/April 1997, 33



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